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Sonic Plurality in Multicultural Taiwan

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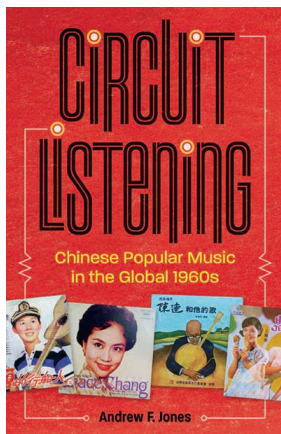
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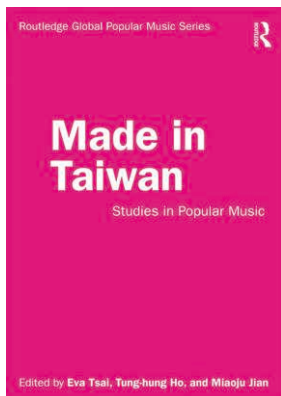
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Sonic Plurality in Multicultural Taiwan

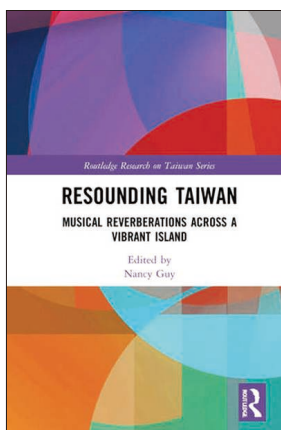
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JONES, Andrew. 2020.
Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



TSAI, Eva, Tung-hung HO, and Miaoju JIAN (eds.). 2020.
Made in Taiwan: Studies in Popular Music.
London: Routledge.



GUY, Nancy (ed.). 2022.
Resounding Taiwan: Musical Reverberation Across a Vibrant Island.
London: Routledge.

In the span of two years, three important books on Taiwan music have been published, highlighting the importance of innovative music scholarship in a field where music and sonic studies are too often marginalised. The two collective books – *Made in Taiwan: Studies in Popular Music* edited by Eva Tsai, Tung-hung Ho, and Miaoju Jian (2020) and *Resounding Taiwan: Musical Reverberation Across a Vibrant Island* edited by Nancy Guy (2022) – as well as the monograph by Andrew F. Jones, *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s* (2020), offer new and exciting perspectives of the role music plays in Taiwan and beyond, ranging from cultural studies, music studies, political science, and sociology to ethnomusicology. As stated by Nancy Guy in the introduction of *Resounding Taiwan*, music studies are often neglected in the growing field of Taiwan studies: “If we were to take the body of Taiwan studies scholarship as representative of Taiwan, we would conclude that the island is virtually silent, excepting human verbal communication” (Guy 2022: 1).¹ If music studies are marginalised in Taiwan scholarship, these three books show on the contrary the vitality and originality of music studies in the Taiwan context. The collective book edited by Tsai, Ho, and Jian focuses on popular music, and provides a much-needed complement in English to Ho’s seminal collective book published in 2015 on Taiwan’s sound culture (Ho, Cheng, and Lo 2015). If Andrew F. Jones monography is not entirely devoted to Taiwan, most of its chapters do focus on Taiwan, and provide a very stimulating conceptual framework allowing us to think of Taiwanese music in relation to the global music circuit of the 1960s. These three books are very different from each other, but they do resonate with one another, and provide a very interesting overview on the most recent scholarship on Taiwan music and sound.

In search of an “authentic” Taiwan sound

If what we understand as “popular music” in Taiwan “began in the early 1900s, when Taiwan was under Japanese rule [1895-1945]” (Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 2) with the introduction of the phonograph by the Japanese coloniser, Taiwan music existed long before. Several musicologists since the Japanese colonial period have searched for an “authentic” Taiwanese sound, conducting fieldworks in the Taiwan

1. Since Routledge, the publisher of *Resounding Taiwan*, declined to provide a physical copy of the book or a PDF, I had to use a very inconvenient eBook only accessible using a proprietary software. I therefore cannot double-check the page numbering of the book – I apologise in advance for any errors.

countryside and in indigenous territories to record a disappearing folk music. Ying-fen Wang recalls in her chapter how two Japanese musicologists commissioned by the Taiwan Governor-General Office “carr[ie]d out the first comprehensive survey of Taiwan music in the spring of 1943” (Guy 2022: 11). Their endeavour was of course politically motivated; in the midst of the Pacific War, the Japanese government used scientific fieldwork to legitimise their colonial rule. In the 1960s, after the Republic of China (ROC) retreat to Taiwan and during the Chinese National Party’s (hereafter KMT) authoritarian rule, Taiwanese music producers such as Hong Chuan-sing 洪傳興 travelled to indigenous territories to record songs and sell them under the label “mountain songs” to a Han urban audience, as Kuo-chao Huang recalls in his chapter. As the KMT language policies stigmatised aboriginal and native languages, “mountain songs” were progressively transformed into Mandarin songs.

Against the tendency of essentialising and reifying Taiwan indigenous music by only considering them in terms of “tradition” or “authenticity,” the opportune chapter written by D.J. Hattfield shows how contemporary indigenous musicians negotiate alliances with other communities and challenge settler narratives about their identity. “Like Indigenous people elsewhere, Taiwanese Indigenous people employ popular music genres in ways that frustrate false binaries between tradition and modernity” (Guy 2022: 32). They perform many different kind of music, such as “*enka*-inspired songs [a popular Japanese music genre], a variety of Latin musics, hip hop, and EDM [electronic dance music]” (ibid.). Hattfield’s meticulous ethnography also shows how indigenous Amis singers formed tactical alliances with settler democracy activists in the 1990s, or more recently with Austronesian communities of the Pacific in a decolonial perspective.

Another famous fieldwork concerns Taiwanese Hokkien (hereafter *taiyu* 台語) folk songs in the 1960s. Andrew F. Jones recalls in his book the “discovery” of the Taiwanese folk singer Chen Da 陳達 (also written Chen Ta), and the “folk circuit” it created. “By the summer of 1967, leading a contingent of ethnographers and enthusiasts, [the composer] Hsu [Tsang-Houei 許常惠] had begun to comb the rural soundscape for traces of a heritage that he believed had been submerged, not only in Taipei but across the island, in a deluge of commercial pop music” (Jones 2020: 135) before “discovering” the old folk musician Chen Da. Later, a record of Chen Da was produced in Taipei to introduce an urban audience to this rediscovered Taiwanese folk tradition.

ROC and Roll: The introduction of “hot music” in Taiwan and its legacy

Another musical circuit analysed by Andrew F. Jones is linked to the American military presence in Taiwan since the 1950s and pirated records produced on the island. US military garrisons were stationed in Taiwan to contain the spread of communism in East Asia, and functioned, as Jones puts it, “as a ‘semiconductor’ in this particular musical circuit” (Jones 2020: 116). US military personnel brought with them American popular music records, and set up radio stations, bars, and clubs where they could listen to rock and jazz performances. Plugged into this military circuit, some Taiwanese could use their connections to produce pirated records of the Anglo-

American Billboard Top 40 songs, called “hot music” (*remen yinyue* 熱門音樂). This pirated record industry influenced Taiwan’s popular music scene, and was exported throughout East Asia. Jones, as well as more recently Hsiung (2020), points out the role of “Mainlanders” (*waishengren* 外省人) and the children of KMT military personnel in the development of rock music in Taiwan.

In her chapter, Meng Tze Chu analyses collective memories of ageing pop rock lovers. “In 1965, due to the escalation of the Vietnam War, the US Department of Defense assigned Taiwan as a station of the Rest and Recuperation Program for off-duty military” (Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 107), where young Taiwanese such as Tommy Wang, the organiser of the “Melody of Youth” series, which recreates the performances of the 1960s, “spent almost every night in these clubs, drinking [...] watching stripteases. American clubs were the only places where these kinds of shows were allowed” (ibid.: 111). The hegemony of American pop rock music was challenged in the 1970s with the “Campus Folk Movement.” As Tung-hung Ho aptly describes, the campus folk scene of the 1970s “expressed the first turn to musical nativism in postwar Taiwan” (ibid.: 28) after the exclusion of the ROC from the United Nations in 1971. “In the 1970s, the folk, singer-songwriter strand of Anglo-American popular music was further appropriated by college-educated youth in Taiwan. ‘To sing their own song,’ they referenced and reinvented folk songs” (ibid.: 31).

Deng Lijun, the voice of Mandopop and the Cold War

In each book, several chapters are dedicated to the songs and life of Deng Lijun 鄧麗君 (Teresa Teng), Taiwan’s foremost popular singer, who passed away in 1995. In her chapter, Meredith Schweig draws on ethnomusicologist Katherine Meizel’s concept of “multivocality” (2020) to understand the multiple influences and singing voices of Teresa Teng. Schweig argues that we cannot comprehend Teng’s legacy without taking a closer look at “tensions arising from her status as a *waishengren*, between claims to Chinese subjectivity on the one hand and attachments to Taiwanese life on the other” (Guy 2022: 215). Growing up in a diverse community of *waishengren*, she was able to listen to a multiplicity of music and sounds, from Chinese traditional tunes to *enka* music and “Hoklo drinking tunes” (ibid.: 217). In his chapter, Chen-ching Cheng insists on the political role of Teresa Teng, dubbed the “sweetheart of the military.” If she regularly performed for the military, it was also due to the KMT hegemony; these performances “were simply taken as ‘bargaining chips,’ contributing back to her country in exchange for a wider space to further develop her career abroad” (Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 201).

An international scandal in 1979 nevertheless drew Teresa Teng closer to the KMT. After the exclusion of Taiwan from the United Nations, it became more complicated for Taiwanese nationals to travel abroad. As Andrew F. Jones recalls, “fearful of losing her access to the Japanese entertainment circuit, Teng purchased a fraudulent Indonesian passport in Hong Kong to smuggle herself back into the country for a concert tour. Upon her arrival at Haneda Airport in Tokyo, however, she was questioned, detained, and deported” (Jones 2020: 181). The KMT used the scandal to weaponise Teng’s voice in their ideological rivalry with China. Her songs and patriotic

messages were broadcasted from Kinmen to China, using the Beishan loudspeakers, “capable of projecting sound up to twenty-five kilometers away” (Jones 2020: 169).² In this sonic Cold War between the ROC and the PRC, Teresa Teng was also a bridge between the two sides of the strait, as she became extremely popular in the PRC during the reform and opening era (Gold 1993), becoming the symbol of modernity for PRC listeners: “[Her] voice serve[d] as a powerful solvent, disaggregating the socialist past and its soundscapes from all that ensued later on. (...) Teresa Teng gave voice to a previously proscribed world of private sentiment” (Jones 2020: 185).

Teresa Teng was the most popular pop singer from Taiwan, but not the only one. The centre of gravity of Mandopop (pop music in Mandarin) shifted from Shanghai to Hong Kong after the proclamation of the PRC in 1949, and “Taiwan then replaced Hong Kong to become the focal point by the time Cantopop [pop music in Cantonese] took shape in the 1970s” (Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 43). Taiwan Mandopop invaded the Chinese market from the late 1970s onward (Moskowitz 2010). However as Chen-yu Lin reminds us, “Taiwan has gradually been losing its advantages compared to other Asian markets, especially that of China” (Guy 2022: 197). Mandopop from China indeed slowly replaced Taiwan Mandopop and Hong Kong Cantopop (Chu 2017). Once the centre of the Mandopop global market, Taiwan is becoming a hub for indie music, as analysed by Miaoju Jian, and has managed to develop transnational DIY (Do It Yourself) networks to export its music beyond the PRC. Taking the example of “the transnational DIY network that formed between Taiwanese and Japanese indie bands with a punk ethos since 2011” (Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 219), Jian shows how indie Taiwanese music is finding its niche market in East Asia, while the Chinese audience remains an important part of Taiwan’s popular music exports.³

The rise and fall, and rise again of taiyu songs

The popularity of Taiwan Mandopop is linked to the KMT language policy and its stigmatisation of *taiyu*, Hakka, and indigenous languages. *Taiyu* popular songs were produced during the Japanese colonisation, as mentioned by Yu-yuan Huang, alongside Hakka songs, Taiwanese opera (*koa-a-hi* 歌仔戲), and folk ballads. *Taiyu* songs production declined with KMT rule, but singers and composers continued to produce songs in their native language. C.S. Stone Shih recalls the story of Hsu Shih 許石, a composer of *taiyu* ballads who funded the China Record Company (*Zhongguo changpian gongsi* 中國唱片公司). Confronted with the KMT language policies, “Hsu, as a strategy, attempted to separate his music career from politics. In his shows, he mixed *taiyu* ballads with Mandarin songs and other languages. He also used Mandarin songs – as examples of ‘cultural China’ – to help export his ‘Taiwanese identity’” (ibid.: 86). Andrew F. Jones also notes the progressive disappearance of *taiyu* songs in Taiwanese cinema, taking as an example the popular singer-actor Wen Hsia 文夏 (Bun-ha in *taiyu*), who produced *taiyu* songs and movies throughout the 1960s, and unfortunately passed away in April 2022 at 93.

With the democratisation of Taiwan, new songs in *taiyu* were produced and gained popularity from the late 1980s onward. The “New *Taiyu* Movement” carried by the label Crystal Records “created

an alternative way to write *taiyu* music” (Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 34) as noted by Tung-hung Ho. *Taiyu* musicians began to reverse the stigma associated with *taiyu*, seen as primitive, by reappropriating the derogatory term “台客 (*taike*, ‘Taiwan guest’ literally), a (once) pejorative term that has been in circulation in Taiwan for several decades, [which] describes and degrades certain *taiyu*-speaking, culturally unsophisticated 本省人 (*benshengren*, Taiwanese) males in the postwar ethnic context in which Mainlanders (*waishengren*) emerged as a newly arrived and more powerful group” (Ligot 2012; Tsai, Ho, and Jian 2020: 36). Ho understands the *taike* musical trend as a nativist cultural practice, which translates into political activism in the case of Freddy Lim 林昶佐, the singer of the metal band Chthonic (*Shanling* 閃靈) and member of the Legislative Yuan since 2016, while Eva Tsai analyses *taike* new meanings in the EDM scene.

The sounds of the city

Andrew F. Jones recalls that before going on his musical fieldwork in Taiwan’s rural area, Hsu Tsang-Houei wrote an essay on Taipei’s soundscape. Jones provides in a very useful appendix the thoughts of Hsu: “Upon waking in the morning (...) I hear the sound of Japanese popular songs, coming from a record player in someone’s apartment (...). Passing a school, I hear the sound of students singing the national anthem (...) and the sound of radios and record players blaring from the neighboring ice seller, noodle stall, and electrical appliance store, plus the sound of bicycles, carts, trucks, and public buses hurrying past” (Jones 2020: 265-6).

While the city’s soundscape drives Hsu to despair, as Taiwanese folk music is nowhere to be heard, the noise of the city is a productive field for music studies. In a fascinating chapter, Jennifer C. Hsieh describes her ethnography of Taiwan’s noise control system, and the difference between 熱鬧 (*renao*, “hot-noisy”) and 噪音 (*zaoyin*, environmental “noise”). While *renao* is usually associated with traditional temple festival sounds, the author asks whether it can “cross the threshold from the cultural aesthetic of *renao* into the regulated domain of *zaoyin*” (Guy 2022: 106). *Renao* can also be understood “as an expression of Han Chinese identity during the colonial era and later as an obstacle to social progress following the May Fourth Movement” (ibid.: 167), before embodying Taiwanese (*bensheng* 本省) identity during the KMT authoritarian rule. Far from being monolithic, the notions of *renao* and *zaoyin* coexist in a set of specific social relations. The noise made by Taiwan’s garbage trucks can be seen both as a disturbing noise and the sound of “environmental degradation” according to Nancy Guy in another chapter. Guy retraces the story of Taiwan’s famous garbage truck music repertoire and the different controversies this sometimes irritating sound sparked in Taiwan’s newspapers. While garbage trucks’ music was criticised in the 1980s, the government had no other choice but to continue playing it “in order to get people out to dump their garbage” (ibid.: 185).

2. See Teresa Teng’s message to “Chinese compatriots” from Kinmen: <https://youtu.be/rIHcC7LWbQ> (accessed on 14 March 2022).

3. See also the discussion between Brian Hioe, Chen-Yu Lin, Lev Nachman, Miaoju Jian, Nathaniel Amar, and Simon Frank, “Between ROC and a Hard Place” in the *Chaoyang Trap* newsletter, 28 September 2021, <https://chaoyang.substack.com/p/taiwanese-indie> (accessed on 14 March 2022).

These three books display the best contemporary scholarship available in English on Taiwan music and sound, by renowned and young researchers alike. *Resounding Taiwan* contains fascinating ethnographies on a wide array of different and multicultural sounds that shape Taiwan's soundscape – indigenous music, Hakka Christian hymns, Taiwan opera, etc. *Made in Taiwan* reads as an essential manual to understand Taiwan popular music and the progressive search for an “alternative nativist” sound, including a much-needed selected bibliography on popular music at the end of the volume. Andrew F. Jones' *Circuit Listening* expands our notion of what constitutes (Chinese) popular music, and establishes a new and original methodology centred around circuit networks and mutual influences. These books show the diversity of research made in Taiwan, which can also be seen by the multiplicities of languages and romanisations used in the three books: Mandarin (*guoyu* 國語), Hokkien (*taiyu*), Hakka, Paiwan, *pinyin*, Wade-Giles, etc. Sometimes this abundance of transcriptions can be confusing (Wen Hsia is alternatively named Wen Xia, When Shia, or Bun-ha), and the use of *pinyin* – especially in *Made in Taiwan*, which does not provide Chinese characters – is sometimes problematic. I however find the substantial number of errors in the *pinyin* transcription heuristic: in many cases *pinyin* has been “contaminated” by *taiyu* – to borrow the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1986) – to give way to a minor language reflected in the music studied in these books. The different influences, voices, and accents in Taiwanese music render its study essential for our comprehension of this society.

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